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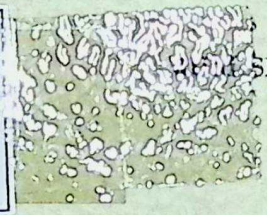
THE CONTEMPORANEITY
AND
THE CHRONOLOGY
OF
MAHAVIRA & BUDDHA



Muni SHRI NAGRAJJI
Anuvrat Adviser

R
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NAG-C

Shri Jain Swetambar Terapanthi Mahasabha
3, Portuguese Church Street
CALCUTTA

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1. Introduction :

At the first glance of history, Mahavira and Buddha appeared to be the same person. Two steps of curiosity revealed that Mahavira and Buddha, though contemporary, were two different personalities, the former having lived for 72 years, the latter for 80 years. The next step of inquisitiveness was "How long was their contemporaneity and who, of the two was older?" The scholars have tried their best to answer these questions, but unfortunately, due to the apparent contradictions between the Jain and the Buddhist literature and the historical facts, an unanimous solution is not yet found.

The scholars and historians such as Dr. Hermann Jacobi, Dr. Jarl Charpentier, Dr. Hoernale, Dr. K.P. Jayaswal, Dr. Radha Kumud Mukherjee, Dr. R.C. Majumdar, Dr. H.C. Raychaudhri, Dr. K.K. Datta, Dr. Shantilal Shah, Muni Kalyan Vijayji, etc. have tackled this problem in their research works on Indian history. Some of them have proved that Mahavira was older than Buddha, while the others have found that Buddha was older than Mahavira. Some are of the view, that Mahavira predeceased Buddha, while some have given just the opposite verdict.

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An unprejudiced survey of their efforts shows that the problem of contemporaneity of these two great teachers of India, was, first of all tried to be solved only on the basis of general historical facts then available. Then, some scholars considered the problem only in the light of the Buddhist scriptures, while some searched for its solution with the help of the Jain scriptures. The result was that, on the one hand, the research based on the general histori-

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cal facts was in itself incomplete on account of neglecting the scriptural evidences and on the other hand the mere scriptural evidences coloured the whole issue with a sectarian tint. Thus to arrive at the perfect solution, one has to think over the issue, giving proportionate value to the general historical facts, the evidences of the Buddhist scriptures—the *Tripiṭakas* as well as the testimonies on the Jain scriptures—The *Āgamas*.

2. **Evidences of The Buddhist Scriptures :**

In the *Tripiṭakas*, we find the discussion about the *Nirvana* (the decease) of Mahavira at three different places :—

1. The *Sāmagāma Sutta* of the Majjima Nikāya.
2. The *Pāsādika Sutta* of the *Dgha Nikāya*.
3. The *Samigiti Pariyāya Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya*.

According to all these chapters, Mahāvīra attained Nirvana in Pāvā. According to the first two of these chapters, a certain disciple of Buddha called Chunda Samanuddesa, after having spent his rainy-season at Pāvā, went to Samagama, where Buddha was staying at that time. He gave the news of Mahavira's Nirvana to Buddha. According to the third chapter mentioned above, Sariputta, the chief disciple of Buddha, went to Pāvā and during a speech made remarks about Mahāvīra's Nirvāṇa at Pāvā.

Now some authors consider the above evidences as mere fabrications, saying that they are mutually contradictory and that Pāvā described there is different from the true place of Mahavira's *Nirvana*. But a closer study of the above sources indicates no such contradiction. On the contrary, they support each other. Also, Pāvā described there is found to be the true place of Mahavira's *Nirvana*. We should not doubt the truthfulness of the above evidences,

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also because we do not find even a single reference in the *Tripiṭakas* or the *Āgamas* which may tell us that Buddha predeceased Mahavira. Besides these allusions, we find many other incidents narrated in the Tripitakas which at once show that Mahavira was older than Buddha. But up to now, most of the scholars have pondered only over the above three chapters, while they have not paid much attention to the other allusions of the *Tripiṭakas*, wherein Buddha himself has confessed his juniority to the six religious teachers of his time (including Mahavira).

3. **Seniority of Mahavira :**

In the *Sabhiya Sutta* of the *Sutta Nipāta*, it is clearly stated that the six religious leaders, *viz.* Mahavira, Gośālaka, etc. were decayed, old, aged, advanced in years, having reached old age, experienced—elders and long-ordained, while Buddha was young by Birth and new in ascetic life. In the same way, the *Dahara Sutta* of the *Samyutta-Nikāya* and the *Sāmānmya-fala Sutta* of the *Dīgha-Nikāya* clearly state Mahavira to be older in age and period of monkhood than Buddha.

These three chapters are so evident to prove the seniority of Mahavira to Buddha, not only with respect to age but also with respect to knowledge, influence and period of monkhood, that there is no need to rationalize or interpolate them. Thus the previous three chapters prove the predecease of Mahavira and the other three give testimony to his seniority to Buddha.

4. **Contemporaneity :**

The life-events of these historical personalities depicted in the *Āgamas* and *Tripiṭakas* serve as the best means to solve the problems of contemporaneity of Mahavira and Buddha.

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According to the Jain canon *Bhagawatī Sūtra*, Makkhali Gośālka, the leader of Ājivakas died 16 years before the Nirvana of Mahavira. This *Sūtra* also indicates the Ajātaśatru, the King of *Magadha*, had already fought the *Mahāsīla-Kantak war* with King Chetaka of Vaiśāli before the death of Gośālaka. Thus it is clear that Konika's (Ajāstaśatru) accession to the throne of Magadha took place at least 16 years before Mahavira's demise. On the other hand, the following excerpts from Jain literature indicates that the interval between the death of Śrenik (the father of Konika) and Mahavira cannot be greater than 17 years.

Once upon a time, the King Śrenika asked Mahavira : "Who will be the last Kevalin (Omniscient)?" Mahavira, answering the king's question, said to him : "On the seventh day from today, this deva named Vidyunmali, will be conceived in the womb of the wife of Rasbhadatta, a businessman in your city Rajagrha. That child will be named Jambu Kumar, and he will be the last *Kevalin*.[1]"

Now all the Jain traditions unanimously accept the fact that when Jambu kumar was 16 years old, he was initiated into monkhood by Sudharma Swami, the successor of Mahavira, in the same year in which Mahavira attained Nirvana. This means that Jambu kumar was conceived in the womb of his mother nearly 17 years before the *Nirvana* of Mahavira.

Again according to the JainĀgamas, Mahavira lived for 72 years and attained Omniscience at the age of 42. So, Konika's accession to Magadha took place in the 13th year after Mahavira's attainment of Omniscience.

The following four facts are quite obvious in the light

1. Pariśiṣṭaparvan of Hemcandra, 1-262-4.

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of the foregoing discussion of the life-events of Mahavira and Buddha, as depicted in the *Āgamas* and the *Tripiṭakas*.

1. Mahavira was older than Buddha; the former lived for 72 years, while the latter for 80.
2. Mahavira's Omniscience preceded Buddha's enlightenment; Mahavira attained Omniscience at the age of 42; while Buddha attained enlightenment at the age of 35.
3. When Gośālaka died, Mahavira was 56 year old.
4. Buddha's enlightenment had taken place before the death of Gosālaka *i.e.* Mahavira. Buddha as well as Gośālaka were all alive at the time of Mahā-Shila Kantak war.

On the basis of the above facts, the following conclusions can easily be deduced : When Mahavira was 56 years old, Buddha must be at least 35. So the maximum possible seniority of Mahavira could be 21 years, and because Mahavira died at 72 and Buddha at 80, the maximum possible interval between their *Nirvana* could be 29 years.

Again, as stated above, Mahavira attained Omniscence 14 years before Gosālaka's death. Consequently, on the basis of fact No. 2, Buddha could not have attained the enlightenment prior to this. At the most, he could have attained it in the same year. If we suppose so, Buddha would be 35 and Mahavira 42 at that time. Therefore, the minimum possible seniority of Mahavira could be 7 years and the minimum possible interval between their *Nirvanas* could be 15 years.

Thus Mahavira's seniority to Buddha lies between 21 and 7 years. The *Atthakatha Aṅguttra Nikāya* supplies us a complete chronological list of the places where Buddha passed his rainy seasons after his enlightenment. According to the

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above work, in Rājagrha, Buddha spent his 2nd, 3rd, 4th, 17th, and 20th rainy seasons after the enlightenment. Now, according to the *Sāmānnya Phala Sutta of Dīgha Nikāya*, the event of Ajātaśatru's only call upon Buddha, during which the King Ajātaśatru asked Buddha a question about the fruitfulness of monkhood and repented for murdering his father, took place during one of the rainy seasons passed by Buddha at Rājagrha. Again, this event should have happened in the first year of Ajātaśatru's reign, inasmuch as soon after his accession, he had transferred his Capital to Campā, on account of the great sorrow he felt over his father's death. Now, if we suppose that the above event recorded by the *Samannyā Phala Sutta* had taken place in the 17th or 20th rainy-season after Buddha's enlightenment, the fact No. 2 (stated above) is violated. For as shown before, Ajātasatru's accession took place in the 13th year after Mahavira's attainment of Omniscience. So, the possibility of the above event taking place in 17th or 20th rainy-season is ruled out. Consequently, the event should have taken place either in the 2nd or 3rd or the 4th rainy-season after Buddha's enlightenment.

Thus it was the 13th year after Mahavira's Omniscence and the 2nd, the 3rd, or the 4th year after Buddha's enlightenment. This means that Mahavira was, at that time, 55 years old; and Buddha either 36, 37 or 38. In other words, Mahavira was 19, 18 or 17 years older than Buddha, and attained the *Nirvana* 27, 26 or 25 years earlier than Buddha.

Further to reach at a definite conclusion out of these three alternatives, we fortunately get a small way out—if we suppose that the event of *Samannaya Phala Sutta*, had taken place in the 2nd or the 3rd rainy-season after Buddha's enlightenment, it would mean that Ajātaśatru's accession and Bimbisara's death took place only one or

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two years after Buddha's enlightenment, that is to say, the contemporaneity of Bimbisara with enlightened Buddha was one or two years. But a closer study of the Buddhist *Tripiṭakas* reveal that it should be slightly wider than this. Therefore, it will be consistent to take the 4th rainy-season after enlightenment to be the year of Ajātaśatru's accession. This will allow a period of three years which is long enough, for the contemporaneity of Bimbisara with enlightened Buddha. Thus by taking the last alternative, we reach the final conclusion that :

1. Mahavira was 17 years older than Buddha.
2. Mahavira attained the Nirvana 25 years earlier than Buddha.
3. The total contemporaneity of their life was 55 years, the contemporaneity of their life as religious leaders was 20 years.

It should be borne in mind that the above conclusion is based only upon the life events of Mahavira and Buddha. Even if we suppose them to have lived in any period of history, this conclusion will hold good. In order to finalise our discussion, it is essential to think over it from the chronological point of view.

5. **Date of Mahavira's Nirvana :**

The most unequivocal date of Mahavira's *Nirvana* is 527 B.C. This date is approved by a number of Jain traditional works such as *Titthogali Painnaya*, *Titthoddhar Prakraina*, Merutunga's *Vichar Sreni*, *Tapagaccha Pattāvali*, Nemichandra's *Mahavira Chariyam*, *Trilokasāra*, *Tiloyapannatli*, Harivamsa Purana, etc. In these works a complete chronology of the kings of Avanti (Mālvā) from the date of Mahavira's *Nirvana* to the commencement of the Vikrama era and the Śaka era is given. According to this chronology,

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the event of Mahavira's *Nirvana* happened 215 years before Chandragupta Maurya's accession (to the Avanti's throne) 470 years before the beginning of Vikrama era and 605 years before that of Śaka era. The date of Chandragupta's accession to Magadha, according to history, is 322 B.C. The historians call this date a 'light house' in that dark period of Indian history. They decide the chronology of hundreds of years, posterior and prior to this period, on the basis of this unanimously verified date. It is also a historical fact that in 312 B.C. (i.e. 10 years after Chandragupta's accession to Magadha) Chandragupta Maurya acquired the kingdom of Avanti. Thus the Jain chronology and the historical chronology endorse each other and the date of Mahavira's *Nirvana* is ascertained in 312+215= 527 B.C. In the same way, according to the unanimous opinion of history, the Vikrama era started in 57 B.C. and the Śaka era in 78 A.D., so that Mahavira's *Nirvana* is determined in 527 B.C. Some authors believe that Mahavira died in 467 B.C. or 546 B.C. These dates are found to be false.

6. **Date of Buddha's Nirvana :**

It is not so easy to make the date of Buddha's *Nirvāna* so unequivocal as that of Mahavira's. We find an indication of equivocality about this date, existing nearly a millenium ago in the reminiscences of the famous Chinese Traveller, Fa-Hien (400 A.D.) and Hu-En-Tsang (620 A.D.).

At present, there are mainly two Buddhist traditions regarding the date of Buddha's *Nirvana* : 1. 544 B.C.—Based on the Chronology of Ceylonese chronicles. 2. 486 B.C.—Based on the Cantonese Dotted Record. There is also a third tradition, which is popular in Chinese Turkey. According to it, Buddha died 250 years before Chinese

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emperor Shi-Hvang-ti (246 B.C.). On the basis of this tradition, some scholars are of the view that Buddha died in (250+246)=496 B.C.

In addition to these dates, there are nearly twenty other dates lying between 412 B.C. and 623 B.C., suggested by different scholars on the basis of their research-works. It is to be noted that seventeen out of these twenty dates, are posterior to 527 B.C. (The date of Mahavira's Nirvana). But there is not a single view, which can reconcile the life events of Buddha, Mahavira, Ajātśatru (Konika), Bimbisāra (Śrenika), Gośālaka, etc.

Thus the chronology of Buddha is in itself quite uncertain. Also, it has been shown that the chronology of Mahavira in itself is almost unanimous and certain. Hence, on the basis of the unequivocal date of Mahavira, the above conclusion can be put in chronological terms. The date of Mahavira's *Nirvana* is 527 B.C. Therefore, the date of Buddha's *Nirvana* should be 502 B.C.

The comparative chronological table of the important events of their life is as follows :

	Mahavira	*Buddha*
Birth	599 B.C.	582 B.C.
Renunciation	569 B.C.	554 B.C.
Enlightenment (Omniscience)	557 B.C.	547 B.C.
Nirvana	527 B.C.	502 B.C.

Thus Mahavira and Buddha lived contemporarily from 582 B.C. to 527 B.C. *i.e.* for 55 years. As religious leaders, their contemporaneity lasted from 547 B.C. to 527 B.C *i.e.* for 20 years.

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CORROBORATION

We have reached the above conclusion regarding the date of Buddha's *Nirvana* solely on the basis of historical and mathematical method. Hence it can be regarded as a self-evident fact. But, because it is being disclosed in the field of history for the first time, it will not be unnecessary to corroborate it by some other evidences. We get some historical and traditional evidences which directly corroborate the above conclusion. They are as follows:

Tibetan Tradition :

According to the Buddhist tradition of Tibet, the birth of Buddha and the King Chandra Pradyota (Mahāsena) of Avanti took place on the same day, and the enlightenment of Buddha and the accession of Chandra-Pradyota also took place on the same day. On the other hand, according to Jain chronology the end of Pradyota's rule and *Nirvana* of Mahavira took place on the same day. Now the chronology described in Purāṇa, states that Pradyota ruled for 23 years. Thus, by taking Mahavira's Nirvana in 527 B.C., the accession of Pradyota falls in 549 B.C. and his birth in 583 B.C. Consequently the date of Buddha's birth falls in 583 B.C. which nearly endorses the above chronology.

Tradition of Chinese Turkey

According to the traditional chronology of Chinese Turkey, Buddha died 250 years before Aśoka. This interval really appears to be that between the famous Buddhist Council, which took place in 252 B.C. during the time of Aśoka, and Buddha's *Nirvana*. Thus, Buddha's *Nirvana* is proved to have happened in 250+252=502 B.C.

Aśoka's Edicts

The Minor Rock Edict No.1 and 12, found at Rupnath,

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Saharam and Vairat Brahmegira, Siddhpur and Jatinga Ramesvara, state that : "For more than two and half years I was a lay disciple, without, however exerting myself strenuously. But it is more than a year since I joined the Order, and have exerted myself strenuously. By (me) was the [precept composed, when 256 years had passed since the *Nirvana* of Buddha." In the minor Rock Edict No. 2 which is found at Brahmagiri Siodhapura and Jatinga-Rameshwar. we find the same thing repeated with a slight difference, emperor Aśoka writes there.

Suvamnagirite ayaputasa maha matanam cha vacha-anena isalasi Mahamata arogiyam vataviya hevam cha vataviya devanam piya anpayati.

Adhikaniadhatiyani vaya sumi——diyadhiya vadhiya vadhisiti. Tyam cha savana savapata vyuthena 256.

Mainly two things in the above edicts are to be noted : The first is concerning Aśoka's joining Order, which is expressed by the words "Samghe upete". The second one is——the date inscribed in the end of the edicts *viz.* 256 years after Buddha's *Nirvana* expressed by the words *Vyouthena savane kate 256 satvivasata.*"

The words "Samghe upete" in the above edicts have become a matter of controversy amongst the scholars, and different scholars have tried to interpret them in different ways.

It is easily understood, even by glancing at the different interpretations, that the event of Aśoka's "Samaghe upete" is related with his historical religious tour or pilgrimage, which is explicitly mentioned even in Aśoka's own edicts.

In addition to this, the way in which the famous Buddhist work Asikavadana describes the pilgrimage of

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Aśoka, suggests that the expression "*Samaghe-Upete*" is quite consistent with the pilgrimage of Aśoka.

Aśoka has stated in the above edicts that he became a lay disciple 2½ years before his stage of joining the order (*Samaghe upete*). Now, if Aśoka "joined the Order" 20 years after his consecration, as stated by him in the *Rummindei Pillar Edict*, he must have become a lay disciple 17½ years after his consecration. This is exactly the time of the 'Third Buddhist Council'. Though generally it is held that Aśoka became a follower self-initiated into "formal *Upasaka-dharma* (rules of the lay-disciple) from the time of the Third Buddhist Council. Thus, we can say that Aśoka became a lay disciple 17½ years after his consecration ; he "joined the Order" 20 years after his consecration ; and he wrote the above inscriptions (*Minor Rock Edict*, Nos. I & II), slightly more than 21 years after his consecration.

"The second thing, to be paid attention to, in the aforequoted edicts, is the time of inscription, *viz. "Vyuthena savane kate 256 satvivasata."* This line has also been interpreted differently by different scholars.

Etymologically, *Vyuthena* is the *Apabhramsa* of the Sanskrit word *Vyustena* to the root *vivasa* (forming the past participle), and *Vivasa* is formed by adding the termination *ghan* to the root *vivasa*. Dr. Fleet, Dr. Bukler and Muller support this view.

Now the remarkable and important thing regarding this matter is that the number "256 years" of the above inscriptions becomes quite consistent with the date 502 B.C., which we have proved in this book to be the date of Buddha's *Nirvana*. It has already been made clear that the above inscriptions were written by Aśoka a little more than

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a year since he "joined the Order," and he "joined the Order" 20 years after his consecration. Here, we reach a definite point regarding chronology, which is unanimous and certain. It is the date of Aśoka's consecration—269 B.C. Thus,

Aśoka's consecration..... 269 B. C.;
Aśoka "JOINED THE ORDER".....in 248 B.C.;
and the date of the minor Rock Edicts I & II...247 B.C.
Hence, by going 255 years back we reach the date of Buddha's *Nirvana* 247+255=502 B. C.

Burmese Tradition :

The most sound evidence among the traditional evidences is that of Burmese tradition. There prevails an era called "*Eatzana era*" in Burma. *Etazana* is the Burmese term for *Anjana*, who was the Sākya king *Dewaha* which is the Burmese for Devadaha country and was also the maternal grand father of Buddha. According to this tradition Buddha's birth, renunciation, enlightenment, and Nirvana took place in the 68th, 96th, 103rd and 148th year of Etzana era.

A research scholar Mr. M. Govind Pai has found out the corresponding English dates of the above Burmese dates. According to his conversions the chronology is as follows :

1.	Birth of Buddha	30th March, 581 B. C.
2.	Renunciation of Buddha	18th June, 553 B. C.
3.	Enlightement of Buddha	3rd April, 546 B. C.
4.	*Parinirvana*	15th April, 501 B. C.
5.	Beginning of Entrance era	17th February 648 B.C.

Thus, it can be seen that the Burmese tradition is in perfect concurrence with the chronological date of

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Buddha's life-events, which we have deduced in the four evidences cited and above, have corroborated our conclusion in the same way as the four way-farers from different directions would confirm the reality of the pole by arriving at the same polar point.

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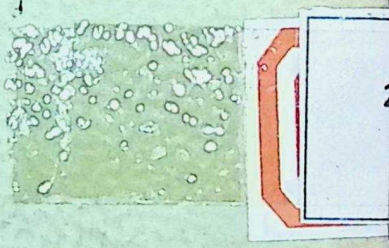

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